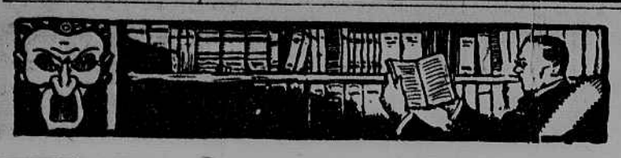
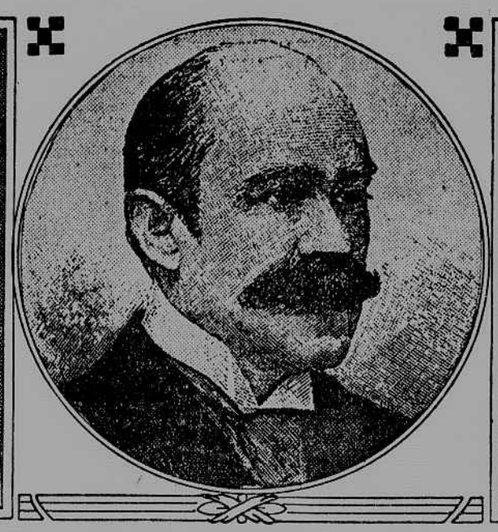


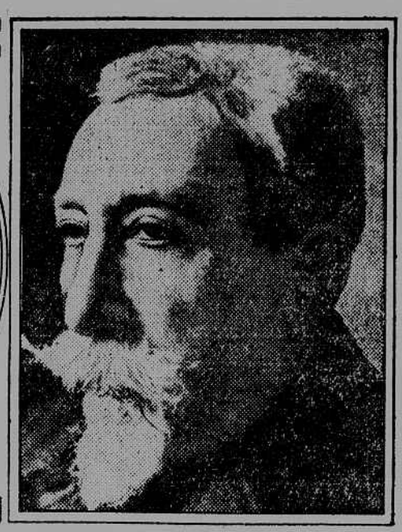
Literature, Art and Life

Three Small Boys Who Grew Up and Dreamed Back Again

Pierre Loti



Walter Pater



Anatole France

IN THIS article we meet, side by side, three small boys, as they looked to their elder selves many years afterward. We see Anatole France ("Petit Pierre") discovering a vital principle in the fine arts and refusing a point of interrogation. We next find young Pierre Loti learning how to jump. And finally we are shown the awakening child-soul of Walter Pater ("Florian").

A UNIQUE rebirth has taken place in France. "Le Petit Pierre," springing from the memory of Anatole France, has blown like a morning wind across the intellectual world. But the child born of memory and the imagination of this supreme artist must be seen through the mists of the morning, or more truly, through the twilight of an old man's years, which softens with his tolerance and exalts with his philosophy the cruder, simpler spirit of the child of long ago.

In his autobiography of his early self Anatole France gives us the psychological conflict of a young spirit, equally endowed with reason and imagination—the age-old struggle of the adult, in the sensitive organism of a little child.

"Since I was eight," he tells us, "I felt that he is fortunate who, giving up all thinking and comprehension, loses himself in the contemplation of the beautiful."

"Why not, then," says Regis Michau, in "The New York Sun," "have first a childhood and adolescence to act, to succeed or fail, then a second existence to draw the moral lesson of the former, and a third life to begin all over again?

"Instinct or intelligence, the reason or the heart, who knows after all which guide to follow?

"His life is the story of a child born in the twilight of romantic France, but who reflected upon his life in the dawn of the twentieth century. As in the case of Walter Pater, 'The Child in the House,' or Pierre Loti, 'The Romance of a Child,' we see how impossibly old and sophisticated nineteenth or twentieth century dilettantism can make a child."

The great novelist explains the detached and yet infinitely cherishing manner in which he pictures the little Pierre:

"I am another person than the child I am talking about. We have no longer in common, he and I, one atom of substance or of thought. Now that he has become entirely a stranger to me, I can in his company distract myself from my own. I love him, I who neither love nor hate myself. It is pleasant for me to live over in my thoughts the days that he lived, and it is painful for me even to breathe the air of these times we are living in."

Following the suggestion of the writer quoted a moment ago, it may be not uninteresting to see these three children together: a curious trio, surely—Anatole France, Pierre Loti and Walter Pater. We have them all pictured by their elder selves—reminiscent studies through a mist of wistfulness. First, a chapter from "Le Petit Pierre," which give us a glimpse of the youthful—

Anatole France

THAT injustice and contempt are the lot of genius was one of my early experiences. At the age of four I drew pictures with much fervor; but, far from tracing all the objects that offered themselves to my observation, I designed soldiers exclusively. To tell the truth, I did not draw them after nature; for nature is complex and does not lend itself readily to counterfeit. Neither did I draw my soldiers after the pictures of Epinal which I purchased at a penny apiece. There were too many lines in these drawings, and I would have lost myself in the maze. I used for my model the simplified recollection of these images. My soldiers consisted of a circle for head, a stroke for body, and a stroke each for the arms and legs. A broken line, like a lightning, represented the gun with bayonet fixed, and this was extremely expressive. I did not enclose the head in the helmet: I drew the head first in full and put the helmet on top, in order to show all my accomplishments and to give equal representation to head and headdress at the same time. I drew a great number in this style, common to all pictures made by children. They were just sketches, if you will; and very summary sketches at that. Such as they were, my soldiers appeared to me very well done. I traced them in black lead, wetting the pencil excessively to make it mark stronger. I would have preferred pen-and-ink; but ink was prohibited, for fear of spots. Just the same, I was quite satisfied with my work, and judged I had talent. Soon I was to astonish myself by my prowess.

One evening—a memorable one—I was drawing on the dining room table which Mélanie was just clearing. It was winter; the lamp, covered by a green Chinese shade, poured a flow of warm light upon my paper. I had already traced five or six soldiers by the ordinary process in which I had acquired great facility. All of a sudden, as if in a flash of genius, I conceived the idea of representing the arms and legs, not by a single stroke any more, but by means of two parallel lines. Thus I obtained a surface giving the illusion of reality. This was life itself. I was enraptured. Dædalus, when he made the statues that walked, was no more enraptured with his handiwork. I might have asked myself whether I was the first to invent such a beautiful contrivance and whether I had not already seen something like it. But I did not bother. I did not ask questions at all; instead, pulling a long, silly face, I contemplated my masterpiece. Then it being in the nature of artists to hold forth their products to the admiration of men, I approached my mother, who was reading a book, and, presenting to her my piece of besmeared paper, I cried:

"Look!"

Seeing that she did not pay any attention, I put my soldier on her book.

She was patience incarnate.

"It's very good," she said softly, but in a tone indicating that she did not sufficiently apperceive the revolution I had wrought in the domain of pictorial arts.

I repeated, several times:

"Mamma, look!"

"All right—I see. Leave me alone."

"No! You did not see it, mamma!"

And I tried to snatch from her hands the book which kept her from appreciating my wonderful achievement.

She told me I must not touch her book with my soiled fingers.

I cried, desperate:

"But you didn't see it at all!"

Still she did not deign to see, and enjoined me to keep quiet.

Outraged by such blindness and such injustice, I threw myself on the floor, began to weep and tore up my masterpiece.

"Poor child! He's so nervous," sighed my mother.

I was in the claws of the darkest despair. Just think of it. To have given such a tremendous boost to the fine arts; to have invented such a prodigious means for the expression of life; and, for sole reward and glory, to be sent to bed!

• • •

Shortly afterward, another, no less cruel, disgrace befell me. It happened like this: My mother had soon taught me to trace letters tolerably. Knowing a little how to write, I thought there was nothing to prevent me from composing a book. I got busy, before the very eyes of my mother, upon a little treatise of theology and ethics. I began with the following words: "What is God . . ." and presently I took it to my mother to ask her whether it was all right. My mother replied it was all right, but that at the end of the sentence the point of interrogation was missing. I inquired what on earth was a point of interrogation.

"It is," my mother said, "a sign indicating that there is a question, that somebody wants to know something. It is used after all phrases of inquiry. You ought to put a point of interrogation when you ask: 'What is God?'"

My answer was superb.

"I don't ask it. I know."

"But yes, you do ask it, child."

I repeated about twenty times that I did not ask it, because I knew, and I absolutely refused to use that point of interrogation which appeared to me a sign of ignorance.

My mother reproached me for my obstinacy and said that I was nothing but a little ninny.

My pride as an author was insulted, and I replied with some impertinent remark or other, for which I was punished.

I have changed a great deal since; I do not any more refuse to put points of interrogation in all places where they are needed. I am even tempted to put very big ones after everything I write, everything I say and everything I think. My poor mother, if she were alive, would, perhaps, say that now I use too many of them. . . .

II
Pierre Loti

(From "The Romance of a Child")

AS IF it were yesterday I recall the evening when I suddenly discovered that I could run and jump; and I remember that I was intoxicated by the delicious sensation almost to the point of falling.

This must have been at about the commencement of my second winter. At the sad hour of twilight I was in the dining room of my parents' house, which room had always seemed a very vast one to me. At first I was quiet, made so, no doubt, by the influence of the environing darkness, for the lamp was not yet lighted. But as the hour for dinner approached, a maid-servant came in and threw an armful of small wood into the fireplace to reanimate the dying fire. Immediately there was a beautiful, bright light, and the leaping flames illumined everything, and waves of light spread to the far part of the room, where I sat. The flames danced and leaped with a twining motion ever higher and higher and more gayly, and the tremulous shadows along the wall ran to their hiding-places—oh! how quickly I arose, overwhelmed with admiration, for I recollect that I had been sitting at the feet of my great-aunt Bertha (at that time already very old), who half dozed in her chair. We were near a window through which the gray night filtered. I was seated upon one of those high, old-fashioned footstools with two steps, so convenient for little children who can from that vantage ground put their heads in grandmother's or great-aunt's lap, and wheedle so effectually.

I arose in ecstasy and approached the flames; then in the circle which lay upon the carpet I began to walk around and around, and to turn.

Ever faster and faster I went, until suddenly I felt an unwonted elasticity run through my limbs and in a twinkling I invented a new and amusing style of motion: it was to push my feet very hard against the floor and then lift them up together suddenly for a half second. When I fell, up I sprang and recommenced my play. Bang-bang! with ever increasing noise I went against the floor, and at last I began to feel a singular but agreeable dizziness in my head. I knew how to jump! I knew how to run!

I am convinced that that is my earliest distinct recollection of great joyousness.

In the circle of light which grew ever more and more narrow, I still jumped; but as I did so I had thoughts that were of an intensity not habitual with me. At the same time my tiny limbs discovered their power, my spirit also knew itself; a burst of light overspread my mind where dawning ideas showed forth feebly. And it is without doubt to the inner awakening that this fleeting moment of my life owes its existence, owes undoubtedly its permanency in memory.

III
Walter Pater

(From "The Child in the House")

WITH Florian, then, the sense of home became singularly intense, his good fortune being that the special character of his home was in itself so essentially homelike. As after many wanderings I have come to fancy that some parts of Surrey and Kent are, for Englishmen, the true landscape, true home counties, by right partly of a certain earthy warmth in the yellow of the sand below their gorse bushes, and of a certain gray-blue mist, after rain, in the hollows of the hills there, welcome to fatigued eyes, and never seen further south; so I think that the sort of house I have described, with precisely those proportions of red-brick and green, and with a just perceptible monotony in the subdued order of it, for its distinguishing note, is, for Englishmen at least, typically homelike. And so for Florian that general human instinct was reinforced by this special homelikeness in the place his wandering soul had happened to light on, as in the second degree its body and earthly tabernacle the sense of harmony between his soul and its physical environment became, for a time at least, like perfectly played music, and the life led there singularly tranquil and filled with a curious sense of self-possession. The love of security of an habitually undisputed standing ground or sleeping place came to count for much in the generation and correcting of his thoughts, and afterward as a salutary principle of restraint in all his wanderings of spirit. The wistful yearning toward home in absence from it, as the shadows of evening deepened, and he followed in thought what was doing there from hour to hour, interpreted to him much of a yearning and regret he experienced afterward, toward he knew not what, out of strange ways of feeling and thought in which from time to time his spirit found itself alone, and in the tears shed in such absences there seemed always to be some soul-subduing foretaste of what his last tears might be.

And the sense of security could hardly have been deeper, the quiet of the child's soul being one with the quiet of its home, a place "inclosed" and "sealed." But upon this assured place, upon the child's assured soul which resembled it, there came floating in from the larger world without, as at windows left ajar unknowingly, or over the high garden walls, two streams of impressions, the sentiments of beauty and pain—recognitions of the visible, tangible, audible loveliness of things, as a very real and somewhat tyrannous element in them—and of the sorrow of the world, of grown people and children and animals, as a thing not to be put by in them. From this point he could trace two predominant processes of mental change in him—the growth of an almost diseased sensibility to the spectacle of suffering and, parallel with this, the rapid growth of a certain capacity of fascination by bright color and choice form—the sweet carrings, for instance, of the lips of those who seemed to him comely persons, modulated in such delicate unison to the things they said or sang, marking early the activity in him of a more than customary sensuousness, "the lust of the eye," as the preacher says, which might lead him, one day, how far! Could he have foreseen the weariness of the way!

What Jerome Myers Saw in the Street

"IT TAKES vision of a rare quality to see beauty in the streets of New York City during the hot summer days," observes a writer in "The Touchstone," "but Jerome Myers possesses this marvellous gift. His flying pencil," we read on—"finds beauty in patient old men and little children relaxed from the heat, sitting unconscious and graceful as wild creatures in the shade of thin-leaved park trees and beside quiet fountains. He has made something immortal of people imprisoned in the relentless oven of the East Side as they grope their way feebly to housetops seeking a breath of air.

"The streets of New York City are not the joyous places in summer that they are in winter, for the quivering glare from the pavements makes even little children cautious about starting games. Yet children do play even in August, though not at noonday. In the early morning and in the evening, however, they come out from their stifling rooms seeking excitement, embarking upon all sorts of delightful adventures that a grown person could never understand. Though they wade in gutters instead of clear brooks and shriek with delight at the fearsome depths of the water nearest the curbs, and though they know only the false whistle of the bird-whistle vender instead of the liquid song of a real bird, still, life to them is gay and wonderful, and Jerome Myers with his swift, vigorous, tender and true pencil makes us conscious of the love and the supreme beauty of their life, even as it is lived in the crowded quarters of our great metropolis.

"Jerome Myers, ever searching for beauty, wanders wherever little children are playing, whether in our own American cities, out in the country or in the picturesque capitals of the Old World. Always he seeks life and motion; life whether crushed by sadness or overflowing with such unquenchable joy that a dance is born. He gives us something more than the eye can grasp. In his etchings of children dancing on the street we feel conscious that a hand-organ man must be near by grinding out inspiration. As we look at his etching of people sitting in hot halls listening to the music we become aware of the powerful uplifting influence that music wields over the lives of workers whose days have little of beauty or pleasure.

"It seems amazing that joy or sorrow can be expressed in a line, that fear or trust can look out from a man's eyes when an artist commands. A pencil that cuts the surface of a paper with such beauty that it becomes immortal, a needle that etches a plate with record of truth, with delicacy or strength, does so because the spirit of the artist directs. It is impossible for a painstaking worker to copy an etching, no matter how conscientiously he struggles, for he can never endow his stroke with the spontaneity that directs the artist's hand as he gives expression to his vision or strives to follow an idea with expressive stroke. In Mr. Myers's etchings we feel no sense of labored study, we feel more as though each picture was an impromptu translation of something exquisite that passed through his mind.

"Old Friends": A summer evening, from an etching by Jerome Myers

—From *The Touchstone*

"Beauty must be in a man's soul before he can recognize or record the beauty of the external world. One can see from the flash of enthusiasm in Mr. Myers's eyes his zest of life, his sense of humor and his appreciation of the myriads of small things in even the most commonplace life that holds something of wonder in it. He has a personality of rare charm, and it is this charm that somehow colors his work. It is one thing to appreciate beauty, to see humor in situations overlooked by the average man and to chuckle quietly to one's self over life's adventures, but it is quite another thing to be able to reveal through pencil and etcher's tool that same beauty and humor.

"It seems amazing that any one could make a black and white drawing or etching carry a message of tenderness, could make dead copper, wax and biting acid bear an impression of spirituality. Yet Mr. Myers can do this wonderful thing. He not only gives the aura of happiness radiating from the face, the rhythm of motion in the running of a child, but also conveys an impression of color. His etchings are never dead. One almost fancies that color has been used in some subtle way, so glowing are his drawings. This is simply because he has caught the vital gesture or characteristic, to the exclusion of all non-essentials. His art in a way is that of elimination. He does not waste one stroke in recording something that has no weight in the picture.

"The etcher's art is one of suggestion. It deals with impressions instead of photographic detail. In a way it is like a Japanese poem, in so far as its purpose is to reveal one beautiful thought, not a measured line. The Japanese do not care for the technique of feet, rhymes and stanzas. To them a poem is a beautifully worded thought, whether long or short. Mr. Myers always gives us that one thought that he felt to be beautiful or one phase of life that he felt to be interesting and everything else has been eliminated. With but a stroke or two he suggests an entire city street, a park, a building or a tree. We read all that he meant us to read in those few sketched lines, hardly conscious ourselves that they are there, yet without them we could not get the story he intended to tell.

"In Mr. Myers's life there is always talk and thought of art, for his wife is a sculptor who has reached deserved recognition, and his beautiful little daughter is a dancer of rare gifts."

Lacemaking

The art of lacemaking was first taught to the Chinese of the Chefoo district by foreign missionaries about twenty-five years ago. They believed that by teaching lacemaking the women and girls would find profitable employment within their own homes, and the subsequent spread of the industry has fully justified their efforts.

—*Indianapolis News*

MARIA-LOUISA—By Jean Bertheroy

Translated by William L. McPherson

Here is a little story full of imaginative and dramatic feeling. It is written by a woman; for Jean Bertheroy is the pen name of Mme. Berthe Carianne le Barillier, a distinguished French poet and novelist, several of whose works have been crowned by the French Academy.

THE singer descended the stairway from the concert hall. She had been singing the old Florentine airs of the sixteenth century—in that voice, at once tender and passionate, which had won her plaudits in each of the French cities where she had given concerts in Italian music. She was of that expressive type common among the women of her country. She had a longish face, in which shone two coal black eyes; a sensitive nose; a mouth with a slightly saddened smile which at times seemed almost cruel.

A young man approached her. He was the same admirer who greeted her every evening after the performance — patient, obstinate, determined to succeed. She waved him off with a gesture of weariness.

"You again, Félicien? Haven't I told you that your pursuit is useless?"

"That doesn't matter. I see you. I hear you. Your indifference is only another bond attaching me to you."

"Poor fool!" she called after him, with a strange smile.

She turned away to join her associates in a neighboring café. Joyous cries welcomed her. The little company of which she was one of the principals had very quickly struck the note of frank comradeship. They were artists together. They understood one another.

"Still another admirer who is going to dream of you under the stars," said the manager, seeing Félicien departing with the heavy and listless step of a rejected lover. "Hasn't his perseverance touched you at all?"

"His hasn't, any more than that of the others," she replied, unconcernedly.

"Maria-Louisa has a heart as hard as brass; for her love exists only in the romances she sings," hazarded the young Romeo, who on the concert stage made a specialty of sentimental couplets.

"What do you know about it?" she rejoined bluntly.

She lighted a cigarette and smoked in silence. It grew late. One after another the singers went away. Maria-Louisa remained alone with the little Primavera, an orphan whom she had picked up on her travels and who served her as costumer, reader, and some times as confidante.

Coaxingly, the young girl drew close to her patron.

"Can it be true that your heart is as hard as brass? I can't believe it. That would seem to me so contrary to what I know of you."

"What do you think, then?"

"Perhaps you have left down there, in your beloved Tuscany, a fiancé, a friend who awaits you and whom you will marry on your return?"

"No," said Maria-Louisa, "I have left no one. I am alone—and free. Don't question me any further. You wouldn't find out anything."

Again her face was veiled and immobile. She had closed her eyelids. She resembled thus the image of the god Chronos, who sees running at his feet the waters, rapid, tumultuous and secret, of a life of which he knows neither whence it comes nor whither it goes.

* * * * *

The tour had ended successfully, and the little troupe had disbanded. Maria-Louisa was alone with Primavera in the hotel of a village, where it pleased her to linger for a few days before taking the train which was to carry her back to Italy.

For some hours she was her own mistress. She depended no longer on the public, often as unjust in its adulation as in its coldness.

There was a piano in the hall where the dinner was served. The singer went to it, opened it and ran her fingers over the yellow ivory keys. A shudder ran through the instrument, as if the soul of a dead man had reawakened. Then the tender and passionate voice rose in such volume that the hall suddenly vibrated to its furthest corners.

Primavera had never heard the air before. It was a romance, every word of which emitted a spark of passion so vital that no one could listen to it without being deeply moved. Some minutes passed after the singer closed the instrument. Then Primavera decided to speak.

"It is a beautiful song. It is the most beautiful of all your songs. How does it happen that you keep it all for yourself?"

"Because it would profane it to use it to amuse the crowd," said Maria-Louisa, becoming animated and confidential.

Was she going to tell her secret at last? The hour was propitious for words spoken in a low voice and coming from the heart rather than from the lips. She murmured:

"I forbade you to question me. It is too cruel a memory. Nevertheless, this evening, something impels me to lift the stone from the sepulchre—and look at the face of the dead—at the face of the man who wrote this wonderful music. His name was Batelli. He was the first man who loved me. He had written it for me to sing for him alone, so that in a way I could thus commune with his soul. But I was so young and so foolish! I laughed at the pangs of love. My frivolity was the cause of a great catastrophe. Batelli killed himself because he was sure that I would never love him. Alas! That ardent passion which I had never shared now absorbs my life. It guards me jealously. It forbids me to love another. It is like the angel stationed at the gate of the Garden of Paradise, who prevents me from entering. I am condemned to live under this malediction, and, whether I will it or not, I shall arrive at the end of my days without having freed myself of this constraint from beyond the tomb."

Maria-Louisa lapsed into silence. Then she looked at her companion, who seemed to be taken with a sudden fever.

"What are you thinking about? Why do you tremble so?"

Primavera made no answer. Already she regretted having wished to know this terrible secret. Already she regretted having bent her face, still crowned with the roses of illusion, over the cold and disappointing abyss of love.